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The Creation of a Novelist

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THE CREATION OF A NOVELIST

by

David Henson

A THESIS

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THE CREATION OF A NOVELIST

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Some notes on writing, a brief bibliography of current influences, and an excerpt from the novel *Went Out Laughing* by David Henson.

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Some Notes on the Creation of a Novelist

The thoughts that follow are part of a requirement by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln that allow me to graduate with a master's degree in English. This document is in addition to a three-hundred-page novel that I turned in to my committee. This document ends with an excerpt from that novel. The rest is a series of loosely connected thoughts about writing and writers and a bibliography of recent influences. Asking a writer to talk about their process or their conception of themselves as a writer, over time, usually makes the writer into a liar, especially a young writer like myself. My mind is changing daily. The world is changing daily. I put everything I had into the novel, which said all of this better than I will say it here, and is also able to say it without sounding so much like a deranged preacher or a petulant child. This is all to say that I only endorse these thoughts through the month of April, 2017, and even then I submit them with many reservations.

Much of my work ends up calling attention to American life as unwilling performance. I say "ends up" instead of "attempts" because the stories betray my anxieties--I don't write to prove a point. Even my characters who work fast food or are high school seniors cannot escape the unnatural demands that these low-paying, disrespected roles require. They feel these demands daily, and wonder where they originate. When was this collective contract signed, and why?

How do we treat death, and how does it treat us? I've been that person at the party a few too many times who wants to talk about death just a little too much. It's a really good mood killer at certain parties.

In a short story workshop recently, it was pointed out to me that most of my protagonists are hyper-aware of the world around them and seem to have an amount of self-awareness that is typically associated with someone who's spent some time in therapy. I felt shocked that my lowly characters were being given so much credit, but then I realized that was more of an observation than a compliment. I suppose I always knew my characters were constantly searching for the things behind the thing--that was what drew me to my own favorite characters in literature. I always gravitated toward books that acknowledged that the closer we get to the truth or the heart of how things work, the more miserable we may end up. I find myself writing about characters who stumble onto what they think are these kinds of unfortunate truths, usually while in the midst of some kind of disintegrating family situation. An exceptional amount of awareness without any kind of support system can look like a kind of mental disorder, and it can feel like distress. Even those with perfect support systems can still rage against the meaninglessness of it all. Where do we put these thoughts and observations that go over so poorly in most normal conversations? We think, why is everyone pretending that the world is *not* absurd and cruel and unfeeling and morbidly hilarious, and why isn't that the thing that we're talking about all the time--it's certainly the thing I can't stop thinking about.

Isn't that what literature is?

Beyond a simple catharsis, I believe there's also a transformative power in these kinds of explorations and acknowledgments. Gary Paulsen (the writer of *Hatchet* and many other intense and intensely popular survivalist YA novels) publicly declared that he writes YA because, after a certain age, books will never again have a real impact on a reader. It isn't that I'm trying to write for that age group, but I now know that anything I'm proud to have written would also appeal to a sixteen-year-old. The criteria for being a good reader is that your world is still being actively formed and informed by what you are taking in. A good writer, in turn, should speak to that need--she should create as many versions of the world as possible that the reader might try on for size, and take each twist and each stray observation deadly serious, or they've wasted a reader's time (which is the same as wasting their life, or at least wasting part of their life).

Kurt Vonnegut was my guy at sixteen. Kurt Vonnegut hated punctuation beyond periods and commas. I will never forget that. He got me interested in punctuation usage before I even knew that I wanted to write stories. Vonnegut thought that anything more complicated than periods and commas was undemocratic, because most readers struggle to interpret a semicolon. Language is already a code. Why make more complicated codes within a code, if not to try to exclude certain people? Why write to the people who fetishize punctuation? Those are the people who no longer care about words. Those people don't need you and your stories. Those people think they are doing the writer a favor by reading their work.

And maybe they are doing you a favor, but if they're thinking that they're doing the writer some huge solid while they're reading her book, they can't possibly also be an *engaged* reader, now can they?

Maybe you can have a good story without any punctuation, or with only two words.

Death came

or

Death left

Two pretty decent stories if there weren't any other stories to read. Who was the first person to personify death? Who took the most mysterious and awful thing waiting for all of us and gave it its first sentient attributes? Do we give our anxieties bodies only so we can eventually kill them, or would it be healthier to find ways to walk beside them, to be as aware of them as we can be, and say, "Look at this, isn't this crazy?" and the people would see death walking beside you and nod and you could share that moment of agreement. You might lock eyes with that other tired pedestrian trudging along the street and simply because they can see it too--they can see death walking beside you in the same way that death is walking beside them--maybe that would be enough to get you to the next terrible feeling that comes slowly flooding in like the tide.

Again, death and this anxiety related to death is at the heart of all systems of power. I don't feel intelligent or informed enough to attach systems of power in my writing. I usually satirize them, make them the punch line of my existential jokes. At the same time, I want to call attention to these internalized systems of power, particularly the systems that allow one group of people to colonize or oppress another while simultaneously denying that they are doing it.

In Raoul Peck's recent documentary *I Am Not Your Negro*, James Baldwin calls attention to whiteness (particularly American whiteness) as a symbol of power instead of

a race. He also says (I am paraphrasing from memory and doing a somewhat clunky job of it) that this view of whiteness is a sickness, because in order to hold on to that sort of power, the embedded history of white America--slavery, segregation, Jim Crow, daily microaggressions, etc.--has never been properly examined or dealt with. The feeling of power and superiority must always come at the expense of people who appear in some way different. That is what power is. It works by comparisons that can be tested and proven over and over again.

Alexandre Da Costa pointed out in a recent Humanities on the Edge lecture at UNL that any time a white person benefits in any way from simply appearing to be a white person, that is a form of white supremacy, and that we should--if we are ever to address these issues in a meaningful way--begin using those kinds of explicit terms. Again, who signed the contract? Is there a way to tear it up, to reverse it? Or, because the majority of white Americans cannot come together to make any kind of meaningful reparations, will even those with the most white privilege continue to run amok out of a deeply felt but never acknowledged sense of regret, shame, and fear?

Eventually this regret, shame and fear transform into a feeling of alienation, and, like politicians continually finding more nuanced phrases to other their non-white constituents without appearing as out and out racists, the ways in which most white people conceptualize themselves in the world would seem to have very little to do with reality if they were forced to write it down for posterity.

When we stub our toe in the middle of the night, we immediately curse the dresser our fragile toe ran into, even though that old wooden dresser has been there for years, and

we should have been more careful. We might even hit the dresser. We might shout, “Goddammit!” and wake our sleeping spouse.

“What are you yelling about?”

“The fucking dresser!”

“Really? Did you have to wake me up?”

Now we’re mad at our spouse, both for questioning our pain and for calling our outburst stupid. So, as we continue to limp to the bathroom, we curse our spouse too, but only in our head where we can’t be heard. And by the time we’re back in bed, our spouse is already asleep again (*faker*, we think) and the old wooden dresser is standing smugly against the wall, and no one has given us any sympathy for this little dust up. The pain is real, of course, for a moment, but the blame, if on anyone, must fall entirely on us, both for the initial stubbing and the extended yelling and moping that prolonged the tragedy.

Now, please stay with me as I extend the metaphor.

If, as I have implied in every story I’ve ever written, most of American society is built on social performances, and modern power relies on even better, more difficult performances, and in an age when these performances far outweigh any sense of craft or excess of knowledge a person might acquire to qualify for a job, and in an economic market where the majority of American consumers have no savings and mountains of debt, what is the natural reaction when we can no longer keep up the performance and, god forbid, someone notices and calls us on it? Who do we curse then? Who do we practice murdering in our mind as we slink back to our cubicle to lick our wounds?

And where do we go for sympathy if, even when we broke character, we are still completely unwilling to admit to the shame, regret, and fear that never abates? Even if we

could shout our collective sins from the rooftop, blatantly implicating ourselves in equal measure for the enduring pain we have caused, would it matter without anyone else to corroborate? Would we instead, as Alexandre Da Costa warned against, simply be putting our white fragility at the center of the issue, colonizing the trauma of others?

Out of this realization, I write toward the inside. My characters fight inner battles so that they might come through the other side with enough inner space to provide true empathy and kindness. Like so many writers before me, I only advocate for violence against our own egos, or, better yet, I advocate for the unending process of trying to transform a deeply held anxiety into a calm and radiating peace.

See, I told you I would end up sounding like a deranged preacher.

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Went Out Laughing - Excerpt

1.

There's that thing at the end of *Romeo and Juliet* where both of the main characters get more important because they kill themselves. Like, the whole city shuts down and everyone grinds their teeth and you're left to assume that nothing ever happened again after that, or if it did, it didn't really matter because it couldn't hold a candle to something so big. Nothing shut down for my sister. They should have covered the skyscrapers downtown with giant tarps, covered the streets in Persian rugs, and let us lead a barefoot parade through the busiest intersections. Instead we chugged along through construction and traffic, watching everyone go about their days, pretending they couldn't feel our pain radiating out in every direction.

A moving truck cut us off on the way to the cemetery and we lost the hearse. I was scared they would bury Emily somewhere we could never find her and it would be the same as if she never existed. Someone from the funeral home had offered to chauffeur us, but the old man insisted on driving. He'd shown up in his old tan Buick Park Avenue and made me and Mom sit in the back. It smelled musty inside. I knew it'd been sitting in the garage at his old house ever since he moved in with us. He said he'd had to wake up a neighbor to give him a jump since he hadn't driven it in so long.

A diagonal row of orange traffic cones sliced the road down to one lane and made it impossible to pass. The old man swerved back and forth in our lane but it didn't matter, there was nowhere to go. At one point I saw the moving truck driver in the long side

mirror. He was just a bearded college kid, nodding along to some radio song I couldn't hear. He clearly had no idea he'd separated the head from our little funeral caterpillar.

Perfect, said Mom.

The truck's brake lights came to life and the old man nearly ran into the back of it. I noticed I was breathing hard.

What's the cemetery? I said.

I kept running my fingers between the seatbelt strap and the clip-on tie Mom had handed me as we walked out the door.

It's the place where they plant humans like seeds, said the old man.

Jesus, said Mom.

I sort of couldn't believe the old man was still saying things like that, especially today. Mostly because Mom hated it when he talked like that, but also because I'd always kind of thought he was joking, and today didn't seem like a day for jokes.

I mean, what's the name of the cemetery, I said. We know, right?

I watched him smoothing the air bubbles out from under the decal they'd given us, a plain white see-through cross. The other drivers had stuck theirs in the corner of their windows, but the old man had slapped ours directly in the middle of the windshield. I wondered if that was what you were supposed to do if you were the closest family members.

We know, said Mom.

She sounded like she was angry at me. Usually I would have left it at that, but I was more worried about losing track of my sister than what would happen if Mom had a meltdown.

Can you just say it so I know we know? I said.

Mom hadn't said more than a dozen words since the paramedics left the house with Emily's body under a sheet, the two burly men struggling to keep the stretcher flat as they brought it up the steep basement stairs. I didn't even know about the funeral until Mom knocked on my door that morning and grabbed my black dress shirt and pleated gray pants out of the closet and tossed them onto the bed. I hadn't been to school for two days and I was hoping they were going to let me skip the last month of sixth grade.

Your grandfather knows, said Mom.

That wasn't a good sign. If she was relying on him for the specifics of anything, we were all in trouble.

I know that your sister isn't actually in that hearse, he said.

His eyes found me in the rearview mirror. It felt like he was daring me to say something back to that, something that would definitely piss off Mom.

But you helped carry her in there, I said, trying to point out some real world thing that had happened. He hadn't really carried her, though. There weren't enough men to support

the weight of the casket, so the old man and my uncle Bill rested a hand on either side as it was wheeled out to the hearse on a metal cart.

Fisher, did that look anything like your sister? he said. Wasn't there something *essential* missing?

I was about to press my cheek up against the cool window to try to calm myself down when something crashed into the roof of the car. I imagined a bird dropping dead out of the sky, something large, like a bald eagle or a hawk, but then I saw Mom's fist. It was still shaking as she lowered it back down to her lap.

Enough of your bullshit, she said. Just get us to the goddamn cemetery.

We'd inched so close to the back of the truck that I couldn't see the traffic light. It felt like it'd been red for forever. The old man put the car in reverse and backed up as much as he could without hitting the jeep behind us, then shifted back into drive and started pulling into the right lane. The side of the Buick bumped a traffic cone but it didn't stop the old man. He slowly pulled all the way into the blocked lane, rolling over one orange cone after another, each one making a dull thud as we watched the tip disappear below the hood. We hit every cone in our path, the scraping getting louder with each bent piece of rubber that went under.

As we passed the moving truck, another bearded college kid sitting in the passenger seat turned to watch us. When he saw the cross on the windshield he looked like he suddenly got it, and he flipped his head around, probably to tell the driver what they'd done.

The light was still red by the time we pulled up beside the hearse. The funeral home director looked over at us with big eyes, then down to the front of the car where I'm sure there was a pile of cones sticking out. We couldn't go any farther because of the flashing electronic construction sign blocking the exposed manhole. A few confused construction workers were standing around behind the sign, scratching their faces and giving us their full attention. The sign only blinked two different words: *SLOW / HOLE*.

Asshole is more like it, muttered Mom.

The light turned green and the moving truck held its position while the old man tried to shake off some of the cones by driving quickly back and forth. Eventually he got rid of enough that we could drive forward again into the empty space the hearse had left behind. We caught up and took our place behind it, where we belonged.

They'll have to try harder than that if they wanna get rid of us, said the old man.

We pulled over into the patchy green grass when we'd snaked our way far enough through the cemetery.

Open the door for your mother, said the old man as he got out and went to wait for the funeral director to unlatch the back of the hearse.

I can open my own door, said Mom, but she just sat there, her seatbelt still buckled tight.

She was wearing her biggest sunglasses, and angling her head just enough toward me that I couldn't see her eyes at all. I'd already undone my belt but I sat there for a minute too, hoping that mimicking her was the right move.

Through the windshield we could see the old man discussing something with the funeral director. I'd forgotten his name immediately after he told us. I wasn't going to ask him for anything and I certainly wasn't going to say hello if I ever saw him again. The funeral director pointed at the grass and the old man tapped his forehead like he was thinking hard about something.

I know you thought your dad would show up today, said Mom.

She'd turned toward her own window, toward the endless rows of gravestones jammed into the earth, and the stray statues and monuments that towered over some of them, casting long shadows. For once, I'd forgotten to think about Dad at all.

Did you call him? I said.

No, she said. He can't fix this.

But he knows, I said.

Probably, she said.

Probably?

She bent at the waist and adjusted her black tights near her ankle.

It doesn't matter, she said. He doesn't matter.

There was a tap tap tap on my window and I reached out to roll it down.

The grass is too damp for the cart, said the old man as he lowered his head into view. I need to recruit a few more pallbearers to carry her the rest of the way.

Get Bill's new idiot girlfriend to help, said Mom.

One step ahead of you, said the old man. I just need the boy now, and we'll be set.

I didn't know if he was asking Mom for permission or if I was supposed to get out of the car and go with him. I stared at the headrest of the empty driver's seat and waited for some kind of sign.

When Mom didn't say anything, the old man opened the door.

Wait, said Mom.

She stuck her arm out in front of my chest, like she'd slammed on the brakes and didn't want me to fly forward and hit my head. She wasn't touching me but she wasn't moving her arm either. She was doing something strange with her closed lips, like she was taking quick, painful bites at them, and I wondered if she was crying underneath those enormous sunglasses. She put her arm down and took a deep breath.

Okay, she said. Go help.

They put me in the middle on the left. Uncle Bill's girlfriend kept stepping on my heels. I didn't know her name either. The old man was directly across the casket from me. I think the funeral director and the guy who drove the hearse were carrying most of the weight, but the old man and I probably seemed like the only ones doing any of the heavy lifting from the way we were both twisting up our faces.

There were three chairs set up for us a few feet from the hole. Everybody else was expected to stand. Mom still hadn't walked over from the car by the time the priest was ready to make his stupid speech. The old man took a seat and told me to run back and get her.

I squished my way to the narrow road, figuring that jogging was probably throwing muddy splatters onto the back of my pants. It didn't matter. I should have been able to smear my whole face with mud if I wanted to. When I got to the Buick it was empty. I spun around and inspected the group of people near the grave but there were so few it was easy to see that Mom wasn't one of them. I went from panic to anger really fast. The wind blew against my back and I turned into it. There was Mom, balancing on her tall heels, wobbling up the gravel road toward the cemetery entrance.

I ran to her. I wanted to shout as I ran, say something that would make her stop in her tracks, but I didn't feel like I had that kind of power anymore. I made it to her side and slowed down to her pace.

Everyone's ready, I said.

I'm not ready, she said, still walking.

I think this part is pretty short, I said. The old man said it's just another thing we have to get through.

I don't care, said Mom. I'm so sick of the shit he says.

The road was curving ahead of us and I thought about how long it took to wind our way this deep into the cemetery. It would take a while to make it back to the front gate on foot.

Please don't make me do this alone, I said.

None of this means anything to me, said Mom. I can't see myself here. I can't...

She didn't finish her thought. Her voice sounded weird, like she forgot who I was and was talking to another adult or something.

I can see you, Mom.

No, you all can only see what I'm supposed to be, she said. And how I'm supposed to be it. Like the T-Rex, remember? It can only see you when you move?

I don't know, I said.

I remembered the movie but I didn't know what it had to do with Mom or the funeral. I was thinking about the part where the archaeologist waves the flares, to distract the dinosaur from getting the kids. It seemed like Mom was thinking about a different part.

I'll be home eventually, she said. Go back and be with your sister, and your grandfather. They're waiting on you.

I knew there was no point arguing with her. She never did what I asked anymore, no matter how much I begged or cried. I stopped in the middle of the road and watched her

go. She didn't turn around once, and we didn't see her again until it was already dark the next day.

Six Years Later

2.

Maybe it was a code. Maybe Mom left our old apartment and rode the bus across the city most mornings to tell us something important. Maybe, because we never answered, she decided to send that message through the knocking itself. Her knocking was weird, with its random starts and stops, like she'd spent the bus ride over arranging a pattern in her head.

I'd thrown the comforter off during the night and the sweaty bed sheet was bunched up, only covering a small strip of my stomach. There was that fizzling static behind my eyes and I worried another migraine was coming on. I stared at the ceiling and tried to imagine a clear blue sky, but the knocking punched holes in it, the same way the skyscrapers downtown tore the clouds to shreds as they passed by. The knocking stopped eventually, but it still went on just as loudly in my mind. It would stay there for hours, long after I reached the high school and settled in for the numb, endless day. Her hand would be a chisel by then, chipping away at my skull from the inside.

In bed, I stretched my mouth so wide that it hurt, then traced the thin ledge of my lips with my fingertips. Mom was probably down the stairs by now, making her way back out toward the crumpled tinfoil edges of the city. I could see her on the bus, gripping the steel

bar above her head and doing those reluctant hip leans whenever they rounded a corner or hit a pothole. I imagined some man in a nice suit standing to give her his seat.

Gentlemen should exist and they should notice Mom. She deserved it. She was pretty in the morning when the sun hit her straight on, even when she didn't smile. Someone should notice.

Mr. Stevens paused in the middle of the chemistry formula he'd been scrawling on the board as the voice coming out of the intercom droned on. The dry-erase marker had screeched to a halt on the second and final stroke of an *X*. I'd noticed at the beginning of the year that Mr. Stevens wrote all his other letters normally, but when it came to *X*'s, he started both lines from the bottom. It was like he'd missed the day in kindergarten when they taught how to make an *X*. When he was really getting into a lesson and throwing marks all over the board, it always tripped him up. It made him seem like he had a tick he couldn't quite control, a brain malfunction that prevented him from ever truly being graceful in front of us. I would have felt bad for him, but I don't think anyone, including Mr. Stevens himself, had any expectations that a public high school teacher could ever be graceful. It didn't seem all that practical to mourn something no one actually believed in, so I didn't let myself feel bad for him.

The voice signed off with an anti-climactic *That is all* and a long beep. The tip of the marker was still smashed against the board, the skin under Mr. Steven's fingernails turning white from pinching so hard. He was probably damaging the tip but also releasing more of that chemically sweet marker smell. His shoulders raised almost all the way to

his ears as he took a deep breath in, and he let out a thin growl as they made their way back down.

My lab partner flicked my elbow.

Hey dumbass, time for you to bounce.

Mr. Stevens must have been waiting for the sound of me packing up my things. He turned around and gave me his full attention. I knew I already stuck out like a sore thumb being the only senior in a sophomore science class. That's why I sat in the back corner. But Mr. Stevens still ambushed me with impossible questions when he saw my mind drifting elsewhere, and he certainly wasn't going to let me sneak out now. He plucked the black marker cap out of his shirt pocket and fixed it back over the tip with extreme focus and precision, seeming to take an almost sexual pleasure in aligning the two parts, before crossing his arms and planting his bloodshot eyes back onto me. The class was happy to take his cue. They all set their pencils down and spun around to watch me. I slid awkwardly off the tall lab stool and made my way to the door at the front of the classroom. I didn't make eye contact with anyone, especially Mr. Stevens, but I did walk noticeably slowly, my fists rising up toward the ceiling one at a time, like I was taking a leisurely stroll across the surface of the moon.

I didn't hear anyone laugh at my uninspired performance. I stopped in the middle of the empty hallway when I knew I was out of their line of sight. It would have been just as easy to turn right and head for the exit. The door shut behind me and I heard Mr. Stevens apologizing on my behalf for the interruption. I stared at the glass doors that led outside.

The sun lit them up like a fuse at this time of day and they glowed violently at the end of the hallway.

I turned left and shuffled past the identical silver lockers. If I could figure out what this meeting was about, I might be able to go in with some sort of game plan. I tried to count how many times I'd been absent this year. It was probably too many. All the days I didn't bother getting out of bed, whether I had a migraine or not. All the times I rode the red line from end to end, rumbling back and forth through the city for only a couple of dollars. There'd been a lot of days like that recently. I couldn't keep track of them all. I stopped at the drinking fountain next to the stairs and pushed the round button. The water arched out past the end of the shallow bowl and splattered on the floor. I put my face near the steady stream and got a big whiff of metal, like there were equal parts blood and water running through the pipes of the school. I didn't take a drink.

I got to the office maybe ten minutes after they called for me. I didn't have to knock. The door was open and there were three chairs arranged in a tight circle. The empty one was either for me or Jesus. Ms. Lenlin, my English teacher, was sitting with one leg crossed over the other. She had her skirt pulled up just far enough to scratch lightly at a spot in the dimple of her knee, a dimple I had admired any time I was lucky enough to see it. It was a perfect dimple and I would have given anything to be allowed to press my thumb against it just once. Ms. Lenlin had been my English teacher for the last three straight semesters. I always signed up for her classes. Last semester they tried to put me in someone else's class but I went and staged my own individual sit-in next to the

secretary's desk until she agreed to fix it. The fact that she was there should have made the situation infinitely more bearable, but she didn't smile or even say hello.

Mr. Walters sat next to her, much closer than he should have ever been allowed. Mr. Walters was maybe the worst guidance counselor in the history of the profession. It wasn't so much that he hated me, but he hated my inability to get as excited as him about my future. He couldn't stop talking about *the future*, specifically the future of whoever happened to be sitting across from him in his cluttered office. He was like some misguided salesman, trying to sell the idea of a future to one student at a time.

Mr. Walters looked like he was thinking about his posture, like it took concentrated effort to sit upright without leaning against the back of the chair. His meaty hands were pressed flat against the thighs of his old khakis and the dark red hair near his temples was damp, almost dripping, like he'd just barely survived his full day of guidance counselor duties. I wondered how long they would've sat in silence like that if I'd never shown up.

I sat down and tried to scoot the metal folding chair back a few inches but I ran it into the base of one of the many filing cabinets lining the walls. It made a surprisingly loud noise and Mr. Walters squished his face up like it had hurt him somehow, like I'd done it on purpose. One more disappointment to add to my file, next to my grades and my permanent record, that mysterious document that, as far as I could tell, only existed as a fairly ineffective threat.

Mr. Walters talked first but he kept glancing over at Ms. Lenlin. I kept watching her too but she seemed determined not to let on to whatever she was feeling. Mr. Walters

checked off my many *transgressions* on his sausage fingers, listing the excessive absences, but also the lack of turned in work for a number of my classes this semester and then some very specific complaints from two different teachers about my *level of apathy*. I wondered what the acceptable amount of apathy was.

When Mr. Walters finally ran out of fingers, Ms. Lenlin took a turn to speak. She didn't seem interested in adding to the list of my many failures. She had questions. Mr. Walters chimed back in to assure me that they both had questions. Unfortunately Ms. Lenlin's questions began with the word *why*, the worst word you could hear outside of class. Usually in these situations your best bet was to cross your arms and sit in silence until they gave up, but this time they looked prepared to wait until at least the next ice age. So I thought a bit about the last question she'd asked, and I talked.

Buddha said our mind is our mother and it is constantly rebirthing us.

Ms. Lenlin never looked surprised when I said things like that. Any other teacher would have assumed I was avoiding the question altogether, trying to be a smart ass, but Ms. Lenlin always seemed willing to play along.

Which Buddha? she said.

The Buddha, I said.

She'd been asking about a paper I'd turned in at the end of last week. It was different than other papers we'd written for class in that it didn't have to be about a book we read for class. The only requirement was that we explore a *system of belief*. She said that it

was important to understand how beliefs color a person's view of the world and their own life, and whatever way we wanted to go about approaching the paper was fine as long as we could back up the claims we made. I'd turned it in at least ten days late but she'd still accepted it. It actually didn't seem like a big deal compared to some of the other things Walters had listed off.

I know you know the importance of doing research when you're writing an academic paper, said Ms. Lenlin. Your insights need to come from fact, from the discoveries of others who worked hard to publish and share their knowledge.

She never sounded like she was scolding me. It was more like there were some important things I needed to realize before it was too late, and she'd figured out that she was one of the only people I would listen to. Ms. Lenlin knew a few things about my life, mostly from details I'd inserted into my essays. It was always a relief to write down some version of what my life had become when I knew she would be reading it. I never told the entire truth, though. If I told everything, they might get the state involved. Some official person would be called to dig into my home life, and even more people would get taken away from me.

Ms. Lenlin was basically the only reason I still showed up at school. I'd started calling her *Ms.* because her husband left her at the end of last school year. He was a teacher, too. Everyone knew he was sleeping with one of her former students, a girl I used to try to walk by in the lunchroom so I could smell her perfume. It smelled like raisins and sparklers. And sex, or what I imagined sex would smell like. A sweeter kind of sweat.

I'm more interested in the thoughts of things that can't speak, I said. I can't research God, no matter how hard I pray for a properly cited quotation.

I always wanted to make her laugh, but now that I was failing my senior year it was getting harder. Impossible, really.

You need to take this seriously, said Mr. Walters.

For some reason, I imagined the two of them kissing, the bottom half of his bushy red moustache glowing with her saliva.

I met with Mr. Walters once every few months and had no insights or curiosity about his personal life. If I was forced to actually think about it, I guess I would assume that he washed and waxed his car over and over until his hands ached, and begged his wife to rub them just as she was about to turn off the lights and go to sleep.

There are ways to research God, said Ms. Lenlin. Books, the things people have written about him.

Her, I said.

Her, she repeated, of course. But you had to have gotten that idea somewhere, right? And since it wasn't your original idea, you could find a source and cite it in your paper.

I wondered if we were talking about something else, but using the language of school and academics for Mr. Walter's benefit. It felt the same way in class, when we spoke about novels in front of my classmates and I listened to see if there were other, more

meaningful messages traveling back and forth between us that they would never pick up on.

But it was a story, I said, not a paper.

That wasn't necessarily true but I didn't know what else to say. Really it was only a story in the way that my life was a story, or the way any life has the potential to be boiled down to a story. What I wanted it to be was whatever comes after a story, like if a story could evolve into something useful or comforting. If you could work that magic out in a book and give it to someone and they could read it and say, Yeah, I'm okay now. But I knew only monks or crazy mystics could write those types of things, and only after a lifetime of important experiences that they captured and locked in a chest and got published anonymously years after they died, like Pessoa, or whoever wrote *The Cloud of Unknowing*. There was that great word—*posthumous*. I wanted to be alive and posthumous at the same time, or just to walk around feeling posthumous. Everything I wrote down lacked that magic, obviously, and I really didn't want to be having a conversation about how my paper didn't live up to the arbitrary, government-enforced standards of a public high school.

I think I'd also seen the paper as the last time anyone would read anything I wrote about my life with any real interest. It was our final paper, the final thing I would ever turn in to her, and I'd tried to stick everything in there without bothering to do it the way she needed me to.

But that wasn't the assignment, said Ms. Lenlin. And it was the first thing you've turned in in weeks.

I couldn't figure out if she was sitting in on this meeting because she didn't want to let Walters rip me apart all alone, or if she needed a way to convince me that I had let her down one too many times, that she was done defending me and giving me second chances because I wasn't holding up my end of whatever unspoken bargain teachers made with misfit students like me.

There were many Buddhas, said Mr. Walters. And some believe there will be more. Possibly an infinite number of them.

I guess that part of the conversation had gone on too long without the authoritative wisdom of a white, middle-aged man. Sadly, Mr. Walters had a way of saying things that sounded like he hadn't even convinced himself. Was I supposed to believe he'd spent any part of his life studying Eastern Philosophy? Sometimes he subbed in gym class. He would still wear his khakis and dress shirt, but he'd take off his tie ceremoniously at the beginning of the period, folding it once and draping it over the pull up bar. Then he'd roll his sleeves up one at a time, even though all he ever did was stand in the corner and blow the whistle a bunch. Once I accidentally smacked him in the ear with a kickball when he was busy chatting up Adriana Jiménez on third base. I mean, it was mostly an accident, one of those last minute impulses as the ball was leaving my hand. It hit him hard enough that he put both arms out, like he was cautiously wading into a river, as he stumbled a few steps toward the empty bleachers. I was worried for a second that he was going to pass out, but he didn't. The whole side of his head shone bright red the rest of the hour,

though, and he yelled and blew his whistle a bunch more than usual. I never admitted to doing it. Maybe he knew.

Ms. Lenlin and I chose to ignore his uninvited Buddhist history lesson, and I felt that electric tingle when two people purposefully go against all the rules, like when I was six and Mom would tell me we could buy the extra expensive cherries at the grocery store as long as I never told Dad and we ate them all before we got home. We'd throw the bag away in one of the dumpsters in our alley and check each other's teeth for evidence. The first time we went to the store after Dad left, we didn't even bother to go by the section with the cherries. Dad had taken our ability to have a good secret.

I guess I thought maybe it was a trick, I said. Like if we did all this research about belief systems, we would just discover that everyone has always had conflicting opinions, and they'd all been making it up the whole time. So I skipped the research part and tried to come up with my own shit.

Language, said Mr. Walters.

Yeah, I said. I figured out that language is just this thing we use to try to control each other. But you're even more efficient, Mr. Walters. You can line up a bunch of single letters—*D, C, D, F*—and somehow read my future like a bunch of tea leaves.

I thought I saw Ms. Lenlin smirk but she swallowed it as fast as she could. She loves me, I told myself. She thinks about me at night, when the streetlights on her block flip on one at a time.

I meant that you need to keep in mind what kind of language is appropriate on school grounds, said Mr. Walters.

Ms. Lenlin sat up straighter and continued the conversation so I wouldn't have respond. She was probably bored of him too.

It wasn't meant to be a trick, she said, leaning slightly forward. And this meeting wasn't meant to be an ambush. I assume we aren't telling you anything you don't already know.

Then what am I supposed to be hearing? I said.

I didn't mean to sound upset, especially with her, but if we were all already on the same page about this stuff, what was the point of this meeting?

I asked Mr. Walters if I could sit in today, said Ms. Lenlin, to make sure you've had a chance to seriously consider the consequences of not obtaining a degree, and if you haven't, to make sure we took the time to talk about what that might mean.

As stupid as it sounds, I was genuinely surprised that this was why they had called my name over the intercom. School had always been such a foregone conclusion that I'd somehow forgotten you still had to make enough effort to get to the next level. I wouldn't be going back to chemistry class. There was no longer any reason to show up for any of it. They were telling me that it was over for me, at least for this year. I supposed I could repeat the grade next year, but I would've rather let Walters outline my spine in staples than have to repeat any more school.

No matter how you choose to treat it, said Mr. Walters, this isn't a joke, Fisher. We need to know that you understand your options at this point.

There was that tone again, all the sincerity a salesman could muster.

I stared at Ms. Lenlin. She dropped her eyes down to stare at the faded orange vinyl flooring that covered the floor of Mr. Walters's office and most of the school. I knew from her husband that high school kids could be real to an adult. I imagined us together in her house, doing tender, mundane tasks. We found cardboard boxes in the trash and carefully taped them back together, then wrapped snow globes in newspaper and gently placed them inside.

You might be able to do it in a semester, she said.

Graduation was in two weeks. All those bodies shuffling along in big black robes, a parade of rookie grim reapers waiting patiently to receive their first assignments. Then cake.

A tear slipped out of my eye. I turned away and wiped it quickly with the back of my hand. It had come out so fast but I wasn't sure which part I was so sad about. Would I miss school? Should I have bought into that bright future when it was still being offered? Or would I just miss the opportunity to spend a little bit of each day with Ms. Lenlin. I guess I was about to have all the time in the world to try and figure it out.